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A Study of the Italian Academic Credit System for Bachelor Program Under the Bologna Process

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Abstract

Italy is the cradle of higher education system in modern times, but the current complete credit system was put into force at the beginning of the 21st century. Under the Bologna Process, the academic credit system in Italy has been improving, and it goes against the conflicts between new systems and old ones, which offer insight for nations in confrontation of similar dilemmas.

Key word: The Bologna process; Academic credit system; Italy

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INTRODUCTION

An academic credit system is a standard implemented by higher education institutions to assess student's work by means of credits and to accordingly carry out related management. Italy, boasting a long history in higher education, is the cradle of modern higher education system. The current complete credit system established and implemented in Italy, however, was put into effect at the beginning of the 21st century.

1. BACKGROUND OF THE ITALIAN ACADEMIC CREDIT SYSTEM FOR BACHELOR PROGRAM

In May, 1998, Ministers of Education from France, Britain, Germany and Italy gathered in Paris for the

reform of European higher education and jointly signed the *Sorbonne Declaration* aiming to bridge the communication among professors and students from the four nations and achieve bilateral recognition of courses and degrees. Later in June 1999, Education Ministers of 29 European countries met in Bologna to discuss issues like the launch of European Higher Education Area in 2010 and the update of coherent systems of higher education in Europe. *Bologna Declaration* was signed at the meeting to show determination in the construction of the European Higher Education Area, the priority of which is to adopt a consistent educational system and academic credit system among all the signatories.

In sixteen years, Italy took several profound steps in higher education reform to achieve the goal preset in the *Bologna Declaration*. The most influential ones are the Bologna Process in 2000 and the Gelmini Reform started from September 2009.

1.1 The Bologna Process

According to the principles of the *Sorbonne Declaration* and the *Bologna Declaration*, Italy began to enforce higher educational system reform under the Bologna Process in 1999. The 2000-2001 academic year was the first year of the reform. From this year, the new education system has been implemented throughout the nation. In order to be consistent with other European countries in education system, the reform in Italy is targeted at the academic credit system and educational system implemented in universities.

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) was introduced into Italy in 1990s due to the spreading of the Erasmus Program in Europe. ECTS was firstly enforced in departments of elementary pedagogy, education and communication of several higher education institutions. As the Bologna Process went further, on November 3rd, 1999, the Italian Ministry of Education issued Decree No.509 to ensure full implementation of the academic credit system for all programs except Doctorate

in universities. According to the decree, one credit is equivalent to 25 study hours.

Italy fits the framework with its “3+2” *Reform*. Since the reform, the higher education system in Italy has been changed from two cycles (college degree and doctorate degree) to three cycles (bachelor’s degree, master’s degree and third-cycle degree which can be doctorates, specialized schools or post-MA degrees). That is, the 4-year program is replaced by a 3-year bachelor program and a 2-year master program.

1.2 The Gelmini Reform

The Gelmini Reform was put forward by former Italian Minister of Education Maria Stella Gelmini in 2008 as an important step in Italy’s educational system reform. The Reform, currently in practice, is divided into two stages, firstly in primary and high schools and secondly in higher education institutions. The Reform of the first stage started with Decree No.133/2008. Later that year, the Reform was detailed in Decree No.169/2008. As planned, the Reform, in primary and junior high schools, would be implemented from September 1st, 2009, and would begin a year later on September 1st, 2010 in senior high and vocational schools. In 2014-2015 academic years the Reform would be in full practice. For universities, the Reform would start from 2011. On December 30th, 2010, the Italian Parliament passed Decree No.240/2010, which would be put in effect from January 1st, 2011. This symbolizes the beginning of the Reform of second stage for higher education.

The Gelmini Reform in higher education system includes a 3% decrease of financial support from the government (a financial cut of €1.4 billion in five years), the recognition of elementary pedagogy degree as teaching certification, the introduction of updated exam regulations in the entrance exam for medicine refresher programs, the reduction of courses required for obtaining a degree and the approval of establishing foundations in universities to appeal private investment in addition to public funding.

2. THE ITALIAN ACADEMIC CREDIT SYSTEM FOR BACHELOR PROGRAM

The current academic credit system is adopted in higher education institutions throughout the nation in the contexts of European integration in education and the introduction of educational reform policies.

2.1 The Current Education System for Bachelor Program in Italy

The current higher education system for bachelor program in Italy consists of bachelor program, master program, post-MA program, specialized school program and doctoral program.

The bachelor program, lasting for 3 years, requires a pass in the High School Exit Exam organized by the national government and a high school diploma. If

students apply for limited enrollment (*numero chiuso*) majors, they need to survive a tough entrance examination apart from a high school diploma. The date, curriculum, plan of the entrance exam are announced by the Italian Ministry of Education in decree on a yearly basis. Limited enrollment majors in Italy involve architecture, elementary pedagogy, medicine and surgery, veterinary medicine, dentistry and all majors related to health care. In addition, some universities establish limits to the enrollment of disciplines like media studies, psychology, economics and law to ensure candidate competence and teaching quality. The examination plans of these disciplines are scheduled by the Secretary Offices of universities.

Since the Gelmini Reform, students who apply for specialties without an enrollment limit are also required to take an entrance exam. The exam aims to assess students’ learning capacity and measure the possibility of accomplishing a course, which is different from the selective enrollment exam of the disciplines with a numerical limit. A bachelor degree (*Laurea triennale/breve*) will be awarded if a student earns 180 credits plus a pass in the final test.

2.2 Basic Principles of the Current Academic Credit System in Italy

In 1999, Italy fitted the framework of the Bologna Process with its adoption of an academic credit system of higher education Crediti Formativi Universitari (CFU) introduced by the Italian Ministry of Education. CFU, an indigenized practice of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), is confined to bachelor and master programs. Different from ECTS, CFU facilitates the credit recognition between universities and disciplines within the nation as well as those in other countries.

Since 1999, the Italian Ministry of Education has issued couples of decrees and amendments to accelerate the establishment and implementation of CFU, the major ones of which are Decree No.599/1999 and No.270/2004.

Decree No.599 was the first regulation that outlines the current academic credit system in Italy. It redefines “semester” and “academic year” and requires 60 credits in each year of the bachelor program. In Italy, a standard bachelor program lasts for 3 years. That means, 180 credits should be accomplished for a Bachelor’s degree. Decree No.270, an amendment to Decree No.599/1999, specifies in Article 5 that Italy adopts the academic credit calculator in ECTS. Therefore, the current academic credit system is different from the traditional one in that it stipulates that one credit corresponds to 25 study hours in class and outside. Apart from regular exams for courses, higher education institutions in Italy are endowed the autonomy to establish standards for credit recognition, in which the accomplishment of practical activities and internships can be taken into account to be awarded respective credits.

Credits by exam can be transferred into those of other majors in universities in and out of Italy within

the European region. Under the circumstance, graduates are given more choices in their application for master programs. For example, graduates specialized in management engineering can apply for master programs in mechanical engineering, but they need to attend some compulsory courses in the respective bachelor program in addition to the attainment of 120 credits for the master program required by the Course Management Committee before they receive the Master's degree. The Course Management Committee is responsible for the establishment and implementation of course credits.

Higher education institutions in Italy autonomously work out the administrative regulations (Regolamento Didattico) and credit recognition regulations (Regolamento di Riconoscimento Crediti) based on the decrees on academic credit system issued by Ministry of Education and other ones on the management of higher education institutions issued by either the government or the Ministry of Education. As regulated in the related ordinance, schools or departments¹ have the autonomy to establish and review credit unit value of each course. As implemented, graduates need to firstly earn enough credits required in the professional study guide and approved by the school or department. Next, submit application (including personal study plan) for the approval of credits to the committee of credit recognition via office of the university secretary. Finally, get the approval from the committee before receiving a bachelor's degree.

3. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ACADEMIC CREDIT SYSTEM FOR BACHELOR PROGRAM IN ITALY

The new academic credit system for bachelor program is a big step toward a standardized course credit mechanism, but Italy is still confronted with obstacles in aspects like intercollegiate and transdisciplinary credit recognition.

3.1 Achievement

From 2000 to 2003 when CFU was at its initial stage, university enrollment in Italy experienced a rapid increase by 19%. In the next ten years, the national enrollment dropped by 20% from 338,000 (2003) to 270,000 (2012) due to a triple-layer impact – a population decline, a larger group of deprived families and a shrinking number of high school graduates who pursue further study.

By 2013, only 21% of Italian citizens aged between 25 and 34 graduated from universities, which are way behind the goal of 40% preset under the Bologna Process. However, in perspective of the development of Italy's higher education system, the implementation of CFU has yielded positive results.

¹ With the Gelmini Reform, the Italian government cut down the financial support for the higher education institutions, which urged the removal of faculties and the replacement of departments.

3.1.1 Graduates With Increasing Competence

Italy's statistics agency ISTAT and the Italian association of college graduates AlmaLaurea jointly issued *XVI AlmaLaurea Report on the Profile of Italian Graduates*. The data came from 132,000 undergraduates of 64 universities in Italy. According to the Report, Italy's university graduates have better performance than those graduated before the "3+2" system was implemented. In 2004, graduates got an average of 99.6 out of 110, which was outperformed by the 2013 score of 102.4, a 3% increase.

3.1.2 Higher Ratios in Class Attendance and Graduates

Statistics from the Report show a conspicuous increase in the number of graduates and their class attendance. In 2004, students who graduated as scheduled (4-year program) took up a mere 15%. In 2013, the ratio almost tripled, which was up to 43%. On the other hand, the number of undergraduates in 2013 decreased by 20% compared to that of 2003, influenced by a triplet of a declined population, a larger group of deprived families and a shrinking number of high school graduates who pursue further study. The number of graduates, however, soared from 14.7% (2010) to 24.5% (2012).

3.1.3 Lower Graduation Ages and Shortened Degree Completion Years

Due to the increase in class attendance, the years that Italian graduates spent to finish their program have been shortened since the reform. Respectively, students graduate at younger ages. Statistics show that the average age of the Italian graduates has decreased from 27.8 in 2004 to 25.5 in 2013. In 2013, the graduates under 23 years old reached a historical high, 18% of the total as CFU was put into effect and those who receive their degrees in 4 or more than 4 years took up only 13%, which also set a historical low.

3.1.4 Increasing International Student Exchange Programs

The internationalization of higher education is central to the Bologna Process and a priority of the higher educational reform in Italy. As the reform goes deeper, undergraduates who want to visit other universities within Italy or go abroad for international exchange get more chances with a normalized and simplified mechanism of bilateral credit recognition and transfer.

According to the Report, only 2,200 international students studied in member universities of AlmaLaurea in 2005. The number went up to 7,300 in 2013, 2.5 times of the 2005 record. In the same year, 12% of the graduates went abroad for further study through the Erasmus Program or other self-pay programs and 7% of the graduates earned academic credits abroad.

3.2 Difficulties

In 16 years' effort, Italian Ministry of Education has issued yearly updated instructions to motivate the implementation of CFU based on practice of the previous

year, but still Italy are confronted with the following difficulties.

3.2.1 Risk of Failure of Credit Recognition

One of the goals of the introduction of academic credit system in Italy is to motivate the mobility of Italian students and researchers in and out of the nation. While the Italian Ministry of Education emphasizes its importance in Decree No. 599 and No. 270, but in detailed regulations, the management mechanism implemented does not match the goal, in which the Student Affairs Office in every university still has the autonomy to recognize academic credits. However, with the implementation of CFU and the strengthened autonomy of higher education institutions, they have the power to change the titles of their own disciplines and respective teaching programs. This is the reason why the title of a discipline and its respective teaching program vary from university to university all around the nations. In the context of lacking detailed implementing regulations of credit recognition, there exists high risk that credits earned at a university will not be recognized at the others despite the autonomy each university has to establish credit recognition rules.

Some of the Italian universities remove a number of courses so that credits correspond to required study hours according to CFU. Different from the transitional one, CFU does not require the completion of any general courses in bachelor programs. So, students have to undertake a higher risk if the credits earned will not be recognized by other higher education institutions or departments. If some of the credits cannot be transferred when students want to change their major, transfer to another university or apply for a master degree of another major, they need to earn the extra credits that they lack.

The academic credit system for the bachelor program in Italy is part of the government-led reform where higher education institutions undertake direct management and schools or departments are responsible for execution. Despite its aim at the credit recognition and the free movement of students between different disciplines, universities and EU members, CFU does not include a coherent credit mechanism shared by schools in different universities. That is why the curriculum design under the academic credit system still lies on schools or departments. Therefore, under the supervision of government and other higher education institutions, the implementation of CFU in every university would be bettered.

3.2.2 Unscientific Establishment of Course Credits

In the new academic credit system, the Italian Ministry of Education gives the correspondent value of each credit but the credits each course is worth. It is decentralized so higher education institutions have the autonomy to decide the credit unit value for each course, which is in reality further transferred to the schools or departments of universities. The result is that the credit unit value of each

course becomes a measure to weigh the importance of a discipline or to demonstrate the authority of the professors who are responsible for the course enjoys in that domain, which contradicts the academic credit system itself.

Decree No.299 issued by the Italian Ministry regulates that the credits of a course should be based on the workload needed instead of the importance of the course. The results of unreasonable design of course credits would be, on one hand, that students have unfavorable performance and can hardly accomplish the preset goal of the course, and on the other that credit bubbles come out as the content of the course does not reach a reasonable quantitative level, sometimes with overlapping learning subjects.

3.2.3 Unpopularity of the Academic Credit System

The new academic credit system has been implemented for years in Italy, but negative emotions prevail among university schools throughout the nation. In their opinion, the current academic credit system, which quantitatively assesses student's learning, complicates the whole process. CFU, a top-down reformative system implemented throughout the country, is student-oriented rather than teacher-oriented. For a nation that boasts a long history of nearly a thousand years in higher education, the reform is complete and thorough. For both educators and learners, it takes time to understand, digest and finally accept the notion.

The Italian Ministry of Education attaches importance to promoting the academic credit system but neglects to take care of the acceptance among students and staff in higher education institutions. Policies are "forced into effect from top to bottom, but the executors and beneficiaries, namely teachers and students"², understand little about the advantages of the policies. Therefore, in terms of the promotion of the academic credit system, the enforcement of policies and the neglect of acceptance hinder the implementation of CFU.

Italy is confronted with many difficulties and limitations in its implementation of the current academic credit system, which, different from America's, is part of the higher educational reform unfolding against the transition from traditional systems to new ones. The reform offers insight for China that is exposed to a similar historical dilemma.

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² Extracted from *The University Credit System*. (Il Sistema dei Crediti Formativi Universitari).